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Ma(r)king memories: exploring embodied processes of remembering and forgetting temporal experiences

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ABSTRACT

Based on in-depth interviews with nine tattoo consumers, participant observation at a tattoo studio, a tattoo consumption diary, and photography, we investigate embodied processes of remembering and forgetting temporal experiences. We unpick participants' experiences of combatting the fragility of memory, negotiating which temporal experiences to remember or forget, and constructing temporal order through their tattooed bodies. These insights are enriched theoretically with reference to Ricoeur's ideas concerning time, narrative, and memory. By focusing upon the embodied dimensions of memory work, we contribute fresh insights into the underexplored relations between bodies, time, and consumer culture. Furthermore, we indicate the continuing significance of temporal continuity, durability, and the past in accelerating Western cultures. Finally, we elucidate the importance of also attending to "absences" in consumer research. We conclude by considering the wider implications of our findings for better understanding an accelerating, liquid, and unstable consumer culture, beyond the context of tattooing.

KEYWORDS

The body; time; memory; tattoo consumption; Paul Ricoeur

... He cannot learn to forget but always remains attached to the past: however far and fast he runs, the chain runs with him ... The moment, here in a wink, gone in a wink ... returns nevertheless as a spectre to disturb the calm of a later moment. Again and again a page loosens in the scroll of time, drops out, and flutters away- and suddenly flutters back again ... (Nietzsche [1874] 1980, 8–9)

Introduction

This paper explores the embodied dimensions of remembering and forgetting temporal experiences through the lens of tattooed bodies. We, in turn, build upon the literature surrounding material possessions and memories from an embodied perspective, whilst foregrounding the underexplored relations between bodies and time. This appreciation of the temporal dimension of consumer culture is important. It has been observed, for example, that Western societies seem to be accelerating, as captured in Bauman's (2000) notion of "liquid modernity," and the related concept of "liquid consumption," which refers to how people's relationships with possessions are becoming increasingly

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ephemeral, access-based, and dematerialised (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017). This can, in turn, lead to feelings of instability and uncertainty (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017). Indeed, consumer culture contributes to this perceived acceleration by building obsolescence into marketplace offerings, whilst various products/services, such as high-speed broadband, fast food, and instant tan, promise to save consumers' time.

Given perceptions of temporal acceleration, it has been asserted that time has “flattened,” with the past and history becoming less important, and the fleeting present the most significant temporal mode in people's lives (Agger 2011; Rosa 2003). Yet, as Belk (1990) observes, mnemonic objects from one's past can engender a sense of stability. Indeed, there is an identifiable area of literature in consumer research which explores how memories of the past are regularly expressed through people's possessions (e.g. Ahuvia 2005; Marcoux 2017; Phillips 2016; Price, Arnould, and Curasi 2000; Shankar, Elliott, and Fitchett 2009; Türe and Ger 2016). Less is known, however, about the embodied dimensions of memory work, and why persons might turn to their bodies to remember and/or forget temporal experiences.

Turner (2008, 33) contends, “... the most obvious fact of human existence, [is] that human beings have, and to some extent are, bodies.” Our embodied lives are mediated by earthly cycles of light/darkness which influence our body's biological rhythms (Birth 2012; Hoffman 2009). They are also structured via temporal frameworks, including clocks, the working day, and constructed boundaries between past, present, and future (Adam 1995; Birth 2012). Time's passage, and hence memories of past life events/periods, are involuntarily captured on the surface of our bodies through wrinkles, bodily injuries, and stretch marks. People also trace select memories of their life histories on their bodies, most notably via charm bracelets, tattoos (Velliquette, Murray, and Evers 2006) and scarification practices (Pitts 1998); or indeed might decide never to commemorate certain memories, or try to forget about them, through their bodies, as in the case of tattoo “cover-ups” and removals.

We address the undertheorised relations between bodies, time, and memory. Our overarching research question is: How and why do people negotiate memories through their bodies? We explore this question in the context of tattoo consumption. This involved in-depth interviews with nine British tattoo consumers, participant observation at a tattoo studio, a tattoo consumption diary, and photography. Our findings are enriched by Ricoeur's work concerning time, narrative, and memory. By exploring the negotiation of memories through the body, we build upon the literature concerning material objects and memory from an embodied perspective, and contribute fresh insights into body-time entanglements. Moreover, we indicate the continuing significance of temporal continuity, durability, and the past in an “accelerating” consumer culture. Finally, by exploring not only which temporal experiences people tattoo into, or remove from, their skin, but also those past memories persons choose never to intentionally signify through the body, we elucidate the importance of attending to “absences” in consumer research. We conclude by discussing the wider implications of our findings for understanding contemporary consumer culture beyond the context of tattooing.

Materialising memories

As Belk (1990) observes, objects can hold memories of the past. Indeed, McCracken (1988a) coined the term *curatorial consumption* to express how people often view their possessions as comprising a strong mnemonic value. There is, therefore, a notable area within consumer research which explores how material objects can express consumers' life narratives, for example special possessions (Ahuvia 2005), music collections (Shankar, Elliott, and Fitchett 2009), scrapbooks (Phillips 2016), and clothing (Marion and Nairn 2011). Furthermore, in addition to conveying personal narratives of the past, it has also been found that possessions can capture past memories of groups, such as a family's shared history (Curasi, Price, and Arnould 2004; Epp and Price 2010; Türe and Ger 2016), and harrowing events experienced by cultural groups, such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Marcoux 2017). However, given the leaky boundaries between past, present, and future (Russell and Levy 2012), mnemonic objects are also connected to the temporal mode of the future. The nascent literature

concerning death and consumption, for example, illustrates how objects can enable people to transport memories of themselves or loved ones into the future following physical death as a form of symbolic immortality (e.g. Bonsu and Belk 2003; Price, Arnould, and Curasi 2000; Turley and O'Donohoe 2012). Moreover, as Türe and Ger (2016) demonstrate in their study of family heirlooms, objects do not simply carry fixed narratives of the past into the future, since special possessions can also be modified and take on new narratives over time.

Yet, the embodied dimensions of “memory work” (Marcoux 2017), and the related entanglements between bodies and temporality, are underexplored. While time is immaterial, the material body comprises multiple meaningful layers of time, rendering it an important site for remembering and forgetting temporal experiences. As well as involuntary bodily cycles with a temporal dimension, such as the beating heart, breathing, and hormone production (Adam 1995; Hoffman 2009), the body's surface captures multiple unintended markers of time. Challenges to control the body's temporality are particularly evident in experiences of illness/injury, since this disrupts links between bodies, time, and lives, indicating human fragility and bringing time into focus (Seymour 2002). Sparkes and Smith's (2003) exploration of spinal cord injury, for example, identified that shifts in embodied context are accompanied by changes in perceived time. Following injury time can be viewed as static, with spinal injuries becoming involuntary temporal memorials (Sparkes and Smith 2003). Likewise, scars, wounds, and bruises attained from endurance events like Tough Mudder function as reminders of such painful experiences (Scott, Cayla, and Cova 2017). Time is also captured on the body's surface through biological processes and our culturally mediated understandings of them (Gullette 2004). Wrinkled skin, for example, is typically understood to indicate time's passage and our vulnerability.

As Seymour (2002, 135) observes, “Clear in the knowledge that it is time that will triumph in the end, we spend our lives negotiating the boundaries of our enslavement.” Hence, various body-focused modes of consumption enable people to intentionally hide or inscribe temporality upon the body's surface. The expansion of anti-ageing industries reflects the valorisation of youth, and dominant associations between old/ageing bodies and decline in Western cultures (Featherstone 1991; Gullette 2004). People often buy into these industries in attempt to hide, or even remove, involuntary reminders of time (e.g. grey hair, wrinkles, and sagging skin) from their bodies (Brooks 2010; Kinnunen 2010). Akin to life's transience, however, these products and technologies, such as Botox®, are ephemeral. If they are not continually consumed, time will eventually “rewrite” itself on the body (Cooke 2008). People also reflexively modify the body following life events and temporally defined turning points, typically through make-up, hair, and fashion makeovers; weight loss/muscle building; cosmetic surgery (Kinnunen 2010; Schouten 1991); tattooing (Oksanen and Turtiainen 2005; Velliquette, Murray, and Evers 2006); and less often in the West scarification and branding (Pitts 1998). Thus, the body's surface can narrate key periods of time and memories in our biographies.

In summary, entanglements between bodies, time, and memory are complex yet undertheorised and often remain *implicit* in the extant literature. Indeed, although there is consumer research literature exploring the tattooing of life events (e.g. Shelton and Peters 2006; Velliquette, Murray, and Evers 2006), time and memory are not explicitly foregrounded in such work; nor is the decision to intentionally omit past memories from the body's surface. Our paper addresses this lacuna, and builds upon the literature surrounding material culture and memory from a more embodied perspective.

Context and methodology

Tattoo consumption

We adopt tattoo consumption as a lens through which to explore the relations between bodies, time, and memory. We refer here to the longstanding technique of puncturing the skin with a needle/sharp instrument, and the insertion of a permanent pigment into these perforations (Jones 2000, 255). In Western cultures, emphasis is placed on tattoos as finished products (Gell 1993, cited in Sweetman

1999). However, we consider tattoo consumption as encompassing experiences of dreaming about, planning, waiting for, acquiring, caring for, reflecting upon, and the possible removal of tattoos. Tattooing has been used in consumer research and sociology to investigate (gender) identity and the marking/erasing of life events (e.g. Goulding and Follett 2002; Oksanen and Turtiainen 2005; Patterson and Elliott 2003; Patterson and Schroeder 2010; Shelton and Peters 2006; Sweetman 1999; Velliquette, Murray, and Evers 2006). Yet, it has not been adopted to explore time and memory more explicitly, despite Oksanen and Turtiainen's (2005, 127) observation that, "tattoos articulate as memory maps written in flesh that enable life stories to be told." We focus, therefore, on tattoos acquired to mark memories from people's lives and of significant people (as in the case of memorial tattoos), alongside the covering up of existing tattoos (and memories) as a person changes. This helps to understand how memories are (re)negotiated through and upon the body, and hence to answer our aforementioned research question.

Data collection

We conducted in-depth interviews with nine British tattoo consumers, one of whom was also a tattoo artist (Alfie). We purposively selected participants who had acquired/covered-up tattoos to mark/remove significant times in their lives. Six were Alfie's customers and two further participants were found via personal contacts. Seven interviewees were male and two female, they were aged 21–47, had varying class backgrounds, and all were White British (Table 1). Most interviews were conducted at Alfie's tattoo studio. They were semi-structured, relaxed, and conversational to provoke narratives, which capture memories and temporal experiences (Ricoeur 1984). Each interview began with a "grand tour" (McCracken 1988b) question: "Could you tell me about your tattoo history?" Interviews thus incorporated a life history element, given that biographical methods should be sensitive to how a person (and culture) develops *over time* (Atkinson 2001). This, in turn, befitted our temporal and mnemonic focus. Other questions concerned the tattooing of past events and memories on the skin, future tattoo plans, and negotiations of tattoo permanence. Participants' tattooed bodies functioned as important mnemonic devices when answering these questions. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours, and were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Photographs were also taken of participants' tattoos with their permission to capture the visual nature of the tattooed body.

Participant observation – a processual and emergent method – complemented our focus on time and was conducted at *Alfie's Tattoos* tattoo studio (pseudonym used). During fieldwork, the first author observed the goings-on (including people being tattooed); conducted interviews; chatted to Alfie about the history, industry, and technique of tattooing; took detailed fieldnotes and

Table 1. Table of participants.

Pseudonym ^a	Sex	Age	Occupation	Number of tattoos
Alfie	Male	47	Tattoo artist	7 (inc. half sleeve ^b)
Arctic Owl	Male	45	Dairy operative	5
Carmad	Female	42	Litigation officer	6
Jimbob	Male	41	Student mentor	12
John	Male	46	Contracts manager	2 (inc. half sleeve)
Louise	Female	42	Care agency manager	7
Mike	Male	21	Supermarket assistant	9 (inc. leg piece ^c)
Sirius	Male	40	Monitoring centre supervisor	11
Steve	Male	33	Betting shop manager	13 (inc. full sleeve)

^aPseudonyms chosen by the participants are used throughout the paper.

^bRefers to either half an arm or the full arm being tattooed.

^cRefers to a large proportion of a leg being tattooed.

photographs; and acquired her first tattoo. Thus, fieldwork comprised an important embodied dimension. The first author kept an ongoing diary of her thoughts and feelings concerning her tattoo consumption experiences, spanning dreaming about potential tattoos, to reflecting upon her tattoo after acquisition. This aided with reflexivity and forms part of the empirical data.

Data analysis and interpretation

To analyse and interpret the fieldnotes, interviews, and research diary we adopted an iterative hermeneutic approach (Arnold and Fischer 1994). The data were read through once and initial interpretations were noted on paper. Next, the data were read multiple times and categorised into inductively generated themes using NVivo software to aid data management and visualisation. Multiple readings meant data analysed earlier in the process influenced the coding of later data, and vice versa. Over time, themes moved from being descriptive to more theoretical, as data were related to extant literature, in addition to Western notions and experiences of time and bodies. To better understand participants' temporal experiences, narrative analysis was also employed (Sparkes 1999). Each person's narrative was considered in light of key characters; settings; narrative tone; sequence; and life events/turning points; in addition to the temporal modes of past, present, and future.

Key findings: the temporal backdrop

Before exploring participants' embodied processes of remembering and forgetting temporal experiences, the temporal context of such practices will first be outlined. As aforementioned, it has been observed that contemporary Western cultures appear to be "accelerating" (Bauman 2000; Rosa 2003). Reflecting these academic observations, several participants referred to their lives as seeming hurried today. John, for example, noted how he is always busy and "life's running on." Likewise, Steve had inscribed the following quote into his skin as a bodily reminder to maximise his temporally finite life: "Life moves pretty fast; if you don't stop and look around once in a while you could miss it" (Figure 1).

Our body's physiological processes are temporally and rhythmically orchestrated (Adam 1995). We further suggest that bodily modifications involve different observed tempos, rhythms, and relationships to time. Indeed, as Woermann and Rokka (2015) demonstrate, (consumption) practices have differing perceived tempos and rhythms, and can be considered in terms of "drag"



Figure 1. Steve's inscription of temporal acceleration (all photos are the first author's own taken of participants' tattoos with their permission).

(slowness) or “rush” (fastness). To illustrate, consumer culture promises that by using anti-ageing products and services people can shed a decade from their bodies (Coupland 2009; Gullette 2004). Such consumption activities defy the modern logic of forwards-moving and unstoppable temporal linearity; providing the impression, at least to the consumer, that the effects of time on their bodies can be slowed, frozen, or even reversed (Coupland 2009; Gullette 2004). Whereas, unsolicited scars and injuries represent instantaneous and involuntary memorials of the moment the body was damaged (Seymour 2002; Sparkes and Smith 2003).

(Re)turning to tattooing, influenced by consumer culture’s encouragement of persons to modify their malleable “plastic” bodies to express identity (Featherstone 1991; Patterson and Schroeder 2010), tattooing might partly contribute to perceived acceleration by enabling people to continuously mark new life events as they unfold over time. Indeed, Alfie observed how his clients typically plan one tattoo but “... you get hooked, and you want another and another and another ...”. Yet, the following fieldnote excerpt demonstrates how the methodical and time-consuming tattoo acquisition process was witnessed at Alfie’s Tattoos:

I watched the entire lengthy tattoo process for his two clients of the day. This consisted of Alfie washing and disinfecting his hands; putting on protective gloves; placing cling film and paper onto the tattoo bed; choosing the required number of tattoo guns and appropriate needles; pouring the required ink colours into little pots; checking back over the customer’s tattoo design; shaving the customer’s skin if needed; placing the purple tattoo template onto the skin; checking the customer is happy with the placement; tattooing and chatting to them for a couple of hours; admiring and rubbing antiseptic onto the finished tattoo; taking multiple photographs of the finished tattoo for his Facebook page; advising the client about aftercare regimes; thanking the customer and sorting out payment; disposing of any used needles and materials; and finally, meticulously cleaning all used surfaces. (Fieldnotes: *Alfie’s Tattoos*).

Moreover, Alfie emphasised the contrasts between tattooing-based television programmes such as *Miami Ink*, which portray tattoo acquisition as a speedy process, and the slower pace of a more “authentic” tattooing experience:

... Miami Ink, you know, that’s totally different. That’s a false representation of the tattoo world. Where they show you a bloke getting his arm tattooed and people think that’s done in five minutes. But a full sleeve can take 30 hours’ work over consecutive sittings ... (Alfie)

These insights indicate that tattoo consumption might be perceived as having a slower tempo than in prior decades, reflecting developments within the Western tattooing industry. From the 1920s, small standardised “flash” designs were more popular for walk-in customers (Atkinson 2003). However, since the 1960s/70s a tattoo “renaissance” has transpired, driven by technological advancements in tattoo guns and an influx of tattooists with artistic backgrounds (Atkinson 2003; also see Patterson 2017). Customisable tattoos are now widely available (Atkinson 2003), and consumers are expected to have a meaningful narrative attached to their tattoos (Larsen, Patterson, and Markham 2014; Patterson 2017). Typically, therefore, more time is spent planning larger artistic tattoos; tattoo acquisition processes are thus often lengthier than previously seen, and tattoo studios frequently have longer waiting lists. As Louise commented, in the past “you could walk off the street drunk and have it done there and then”; yet, Alfie’s Tattoos has a three-month waiting list:

... A guy comes in with a piece of paper presumably with a tattoo design upon it to ask Alfie about possibly booking in for a design. Alfie tells him that there aren’t any tattooing spaces now until February (in three months’ time). The guy looks disappointed and says it’s too long to wait and exits the studio ... (Fieldnotes: *Alfie’s Tattoos*)

The waiting list at Alfie’s Tattoos constrains people’s capacities to acquire tattoos quickly and impulsively. As Jimbob remarked, at Alfie’s Tattoos “there’s no rushing ... it’s done very steadily.” Yet, it leads to disappointment for the customer above who desired a more instant tattoo, perhaps indicative of the “want-now-consumerism” in Western cultures (Elliott 2008). The slower pace of planning, waiting for, and acquiring tattoos might thus provide persons with perceptions of

deceleration, and a means of anchoring time (and memories) on the body before it seemingly hurries onwards. We now unravel embodied processes of remembering and forgetting time in relation to the fragility of memory, uncertain futures, and temporal disorientation. Ricoeur's ideas concerning time, narrative, and memory provided useful theoretical insights during data interpretation and will also be drawn upon.

Fighting fragility: remembering the (reinterpreted) past

The modern construct of clock time, as dominant in Western societies, is associated with the idea that time flows from the past to the future, through the fleeting present (Adam 1995). Tattooing strongly links to the temporal mode of the past, which contrasts with the experiences of globally mobile persons, for whom a flexibility to decouple from past memories, possessions, and places is important when moving locations (Bardhi, Eckhardt, and Arnould 2012; Figueiredo and Uncles 2015). Tattoos function as a reminder of the moment the body was inscribed; as Sweetman (1999, 65) observes, "... tattoos retain an echo of the pain involved in their acquisition." Yet, participants also often acquired tattoos to reflexively narrate accounts of past life events, stages, and relationships, reflecting extant research (Oksanen and Turtiainen 2005; Velliquette, Murray, and Evers 2006). According to Ricoeur (1984, 1992), humans are temporal beings and time is made sense of through a narrative mode:

... Time becomes human time to the extent that it is organised after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience. (Ricoeur 1984, 3)

Providing Ricoeur's ideas with an embodied dimension, participants' tattooed bodies functioned as *corporeal* narratives of their remembered (or reinterpreted) past. To illustrate participants' frequent attempts to remember important times in their lives (whether joyful or traumatic) through their bodies, following his daughter's death, Arctic Owl got a memorial tattoo to protect his memories of her (Figure 2):

... I've got to have something to give me an everyday reminder just in case you get to the stage when you get older that you can't remember ... you've got a reminder on your body so that when you get out of that shower and stand in front of the mirror and ... you go, what's that? And then you realise what it's for no matter how old you are. (Arctic Owl)

Akin to how possessions can hold memories of past events, people, and places/cultures (Belk 1990; Epp and Price 2010), by tattooing this significant event on his body it comprised a mnemonic quality, supporting Turner's (1995, 250) claim that the human body is "a walking memory." Indeed, Ricoeur (2004, 21) explains that "... we have no other resource, concerning our reference to the past, except memory itself." Our memories, however, are fragile and cannot offer direct windows into our lived experiences; rather, the past is reinterpreted, represented, and can be forgotten (Ricoeur 2004; Russell and Levy 2012). Echoing Marcoux's (2017) informants who sometimes forgot about their souvenirs of 9/11, during interviews participants sometimes temporarily forgot about tattoos hidden under clothing. Hence, similar to how stories, possessions, and clothing can be used to maintain temporal continuity for dementia sufferers (Buse and Twigg 2015; Crichton and Koch 2007), and the preservation of memories through scrapbooks (Phillips 2016), and "reconsuming" books, movies, and places (Russell and Levy 2012), Arctic Owl uses tattoos to combat the fragility of memory.

Participants had tattooed select memories of past events on their bodies; and hence the body offers only a *partial* narration of a person's biography. Illustrating how the past, present, and future flood into each other (Russell and Levy 2012), participants had also (re)interpreted the past in light of a shifting present and anticipated future when planning their tattoos, inscribing past memories into their skin, and reflecting upon their tattoos after acquisition. Mike explains below how he has acquired tattoos relating to his childhood, including Super Mario characters (Figure 3):



Figure 2. Arctic Owl's memorial tattoo.



Figure 3. Mike's childhood memories.

I've always loved and played Mario ... So basically it's just childhood memories of what I grew up with ... I loved my childhood. It's just the thing of having no responsibilities like work and money or anything like that so I could just chill out all the time. Whereas, now I am just constantly working ... I'd go back to my childhood (Mike)

For Ricoeur, fictional and historical narratives intertwine, since they both relate to temporal experiences, meaning that history is quasi-fictive and open to continuous reinterpretation (Thompson 1981). Hence, in light of his current adult responsibilities and longer working hours, Mike's more relaxed childhood past seems idyllic. He retrospectively (re)interprets his tattoos as a means of transporting this past life stage into his future, reflecting how possessions can also achieve this temporal fluidity (Phillips 2016; Türe and Ger 2016). Subsequently, in contrast with aforementioned observations of a temporal "flattening" in Western cultures, this section demonstrates how persons might be grasping for temporal stability in conditions of acceleration by anchoring past memories, in this case via tattoos.

Selective memories: uncertain futures and permanence

It has been argued that within accelerated Western societies "... only the transience itself is durable" (Bauman 1992, 174). Technological advancements enable people to cover older tattoos with newer ones, or remove tattoos via laser surgery. If laser procedures become cheaper, faster, or less painful, thereby making tattoo erasure more accessible, this could inform more impulsive decision-making and accelerate tattoo consumption. Yet, for now tattoo removal is expensive, painful, and can leave permanent scars (Shelton and Peters 2006). A tattoo, therefore, remains a permanent mark etched into an impermanent surface, despite the narratives attached to tattoos often being fluid (Patterson and Schroeder 2010), and hence enabling the "restorying" of the self (Patterson 2017).

Given the permanence of tattoos, the anticipated future is important; indeed, persons require a sense of future to inspire action (Heidegger [1927] 2010; Robinson 2015). The future, however, seems increasingly fractured and uncertain today (Robinson 2015). There were thus often considerable time lags between a life event being experienced and participants tattooing it (or not) on their skin. Carmad met her motorcycling hero – Barry Sheene – when she was seven; yet, she tattooed his autograph on her body in her 40s. Such time lags were commonly due to the future seeming uncertain, and participants wanting to avoid the acquisition of a future and enduring memory of regret, which has been identified as a motivation for tattoo removal (Shelton and Peters 2006). Subsequently, considerable time would often be taken in researching and designing tattoos before committing to them, akin to Sweetman's (1999) participants. To illustrate, Sirius believed he would never remove any of his tattoos, since he would "always think long and hard" before acquiring them. This ensured that any memories etched into his skin would be something he imagined would remain important to him. Likewise, Carmad acquired her first tattoo in her early 20s; yet, she waited until her late 30s when she had a more stable sense of self before getting any more.

According to Ricoeur (1992), to develop a sense of self, people arrange temporalised life events into continuously evolving plots, and thus dynamic narrative identities. He asserts that narrative identity comprises iterations between identity as permanence in time (*idem*; *sameness*) and identity as changing over time (*ipse*; *selfhood*). By waiting a long time before acquiring a tattoo, participants iterated between permanence and change. They would not acquire a tattoo until they were certain that it would remain significant, and thus there was harmony between the permanence of the tattoo and the enduring importance of its symbolism. This reflects scrapbook consumers, who often agonise over which events to include in their scrapbooks, and plan pages in advance to avoid regrets (Phillips 2016).

As well as seeking to remember past events through their bodies, participants also omitted certain life events and relationships from their skin *altogether*, reflecting Marcoux's (2017) contention that forgetting is an important aspect of memory work. As Ricoeur (2004, 85) observes, narratives have a

selective function that facilitates “... a strategy of forgetting as much as in a strategy of remembering.” Although several people had acquired tattoos to represent their partners (e.g. wife and husband Louise and John), others chose not to tattoo these central characters from their lives into their skin:

Dorothy says, “Are you not having my name done?” and I went “No” because your kids and your football team are for life ... But your relationship might not be, and then if it did go wrong you’d have to have it covered up. (Arctic Owl)

I didn’t want to get a tattoo of my wife’s name or anything and that’s been proven right ... Because although she meant a lot to me at the time, I knew that wasn’t forever, that wouldn’t be forever. Whereas if I had sons it’s forever. (Steve)

Arctic Owl and Steve had both acquired permanent tattoos to represent relationships with their children, which they imagined would endure. However, due to viewing romantic relationships as potentially transient, and the future as uncertain, neither had acquired tattoos to symbolise their wives. This enabled them to avoid tensions between the permanence of tattoos and perceived impermanence of romantic relationships. Whilst both participants constructed *verbal* narratives about their partners, they were reticent to express these *corporeally* via tattoos due to the more fixed nature of this narrative mode, and imagined future difficulties of forgetting if desired.

Iterations between permanence and change, and an uncertain future, were also central to the first author’s tattooing experiences. She initially booked in to acquire two tattoos at Alfie’s Tattoos: the first an infinity symbol to memorialise several family members, and the second to remember her Ecuadorian travels. Like participants, she had planned these tattoos over a long time period to avoid regretting their permanence:

I have been planning my first tattoo for about a year and a half now. I have chosen to get an infinity symbol, which I have fixed on for several months. I am not scared that the tattoo is permanent, since my love for these family members is likewise infinite. (*Research diary*)

In anticipation of continuing to love and miss family members in the future (and hence seeking to remember them), there was harmony between the permanence of the tattoo, and the enduring love for the people it represented. Yet, whilst the infinity symbol was acquired as the first author’s initial tattoo, the tattoo to represent her Ecuadorian travels was cancelled:

I am worrying about how long after the event I am getting the tattoo, because my friend said to me a few weeks ago that I had to get this Ecuadorian-related tattoo sooner rather than later or “it’ll be old news”. Now about a year and a half after the event, I think that it would seem to other people a bit weird that I was getting the tattoo now ... This confuses me because my other planned tattoo is about ten years after my mum died, four or five since my nana, and two or three since my granddad ... I feel that these three life-shattering events have shaped who I am today significantly more than going to Ecuador for ten weeks ever did. (*Research diary*)

A considerable amount of time had passed between experiencing the significant life events (i.e. the deaths of loved ones and travelling), and booking in to acquire tattoos to remember them. Yet, the first author felt the death of close family members had shaped her identity more than her travels in Ecuador, and that this would remain so in the future. A tattoo was thus acquired to capture embodied memories of only the former. Subsequently, consumers sometimes dispose of mnemonic possessions (Cherrier and Murray 2007; Marcoux 2017) and tattoos (Shelton and Peters 2006), in attempts to shed/forget past memories. Yet, these findings demonstrate how, in anticipation of future potential difficulties of forgetting, persons might actively decide not to materialise memories in the first place.

Constructing coherence: ordering temporal disorientation

The narrative quality of tattoos sometimes helped participants to create a sense of temporal order and coherence from disruptive and disorientating temporal experiences. As previously discussed, participants had tattooed memories of significant life turning points into their skin, including

relationship breakdowns, births/deaths, and getting through family crises. Tattoos, therefore, were frequently acquired following disruption to life's taken-for-granted flow:

... I probably wouldn't have even thought about having a tattoo. Then I lost my daughter ... Everything was humdrum just carrying along. Everything went belly up and then once I started picking myself up to get on with my life again I had my first one. (Arctic Owl)

Prior to his daughter's death, Arctic Owl's life was just "humdrum," suggesting he experienced time as having a steady and predictable flow. Biographical disruption is sometimes anticipated during the lifecourse based on "social clocks" (Williams 2000). However, the death of Arctic Owl's daughter was unexpected and disrupted his previous perception of routinised temporality. This resonates with Woermann and Rokka's (2015) finding that when the temporal flow of practices is disrupted, time becomes foregrounded. Thus, Arctic Owl began acquiring tattoos once he had made some sense of his daughter's death to (re)create a sense of order over time.

As Becker (1997, 136) observes, "Efforts to reorder the world after a disruption begin with the body." This appears paradoxical given the temporal body is the locus of our physical mortality, and hence the end of our lived time (Bauman 1992; Cave 2012). Yet, it supports claims that it might provide a seemingly safe harbour within an uncontrollable societal context (Oksanen and Turtiainen 2005; Sweetman 1999). Like Arctic Owl, the first author acquired her initial tattoo to restore a sense of order over temporal disorientation:

Am I choosing to get this tattoo now because I am pretty much living an incessant liminal existence at the moment, whereby I have no real structure to my life? Am I trying to tell myself that I am a human being with an identity because I have a life history [tattooed on my body] to prove that I have existed over time? (Research diary)

Whilst time in Western cultures is ordinarily understood as flowing forwards (Adam 1995), when the first author was dreaming about, planning, and acquiring her first tattoo, she felt suspended in a liminal and extended present. This reflects Brockmeier's (2000) static model of time, whereby a person's life lacks direction. By tattooing the past on her body to illustrate that she had lived through time, on reflection, she acquired her first tattoo in an attempt to point the arrow of time forwards once again and restore perceptions of temporal continuity.

Likewise, to create a more coherent and linear corporeal narrative, several participants planned to acquire tattoos as a reminder of earlier life periods which were not currently symbolised via their tattoos. Steve, for example, had recently recovered from the "heartache" of divorce. To mark a now more positive time in his life, he acquired a full Japanese-style "sleeve" on his right arm (Figure 4):

... In the Japanese legend basically the Koi carp tries to travel up the waterfall. The Japanese legend says that once it travels to the top of the waterfall, once it reaches its goal, it turns into a dragon and is like the best of the best. The meaning of that for me is I've been divorced ... We'd had a lot of trouble and a lot of like heartache during all that for six years. So this means basically I've been through a lot of crap and I've come out a stronger person and I've got to the top of the waterfall and am the best that I can be right now. (Steve)

However, Steve remarked that for a long time he was unable to reflect on his past. Thus, although the memory of when he was recovering from divorce is on his skin, the time leading up to and shortly following his divorce is missing, which he seeks to address in future tattoos. Such selective forgetting of difficult times can be therapeutic (Marcoux 2017); as Nietzsche ([1874] 1980, 10, emphasis in the original) asserts, "... without forgetting it is quite impossible to *live* at all." Steve's experiences, therefore, again draw our attention to how the tattoos not currently inscribed into his skin are as important as those which already narrate his past memories.

It can be challenging to maintain a coherent sense of self (Ahuvia 2005; Cherrier and Murray 2007). Nevertheless, biographical continuity is central to identity (Hoffman 2009) and in Western cultures narratives are expected to be chronological (Frank 1995). Ricoeur can help us to better understand participants' construction of coherence and temporal continuity. He explains how



Figure 4. Steve's reminders of recovery.

“the plot,” which brings together fragmented events into a coherent story, is a central component of any narrative (Ricoeur 1984, 1992). The plot, which is dynamic and open to change when new events are experienced, mediates tensions between permanence and change; concordance and discordance. However, emplotment is a creative process rather than indicative of a stable core self. Within any narrative there is an “illusion of sequence,” whereby order is *created* out of a more discontinuous flux of temporal experiences (Ricoeur 1984, 1992). As Wiener and Rosenwald (1993, 31) similarly observe, “The act of remembrance is a choosing, a highlighting, a shaping, an enshrinement.”

To build a sense of temporal order on their bodies, many participants sought to maintain coherent tattoo themes. Older tattoos not fitting with this chosen theme were regularly covered with new tattoos that did. Indeed, tattoo removals and cover-ups facilitate the erasing (or hiding) of memories (Patterson 2017). This contrasts with scrapbook consumers who often refrain from removing disliked pages (Phillips 2016), perhaps because, unlike tattooed skin, a scrapbook can be distanced from the body, and hence more easily forgotten about. Jimbob served in the Royal Marines for several years, but upon leaving he was anxious and lacked stability. He has since become calmer and found peace in Eastern philosophy, symbols of which cover his body (Figure 5). However, despite acknowledging the positive impact the Marines had on him, with his broad physique unintentionally holding memories of this time period, he has not tattooed memories of it into his skin:

Whilst I was in there, I was always thinking about having like a Marines tattoo. But I never got round to doing it ... I don't know where to put it because I've got a lot of sort of Eastern, you know, that side and I think that might look a bit out of place ... It's a different theme altogether and so I'd have to think long and hard about that one. (Jimbob)

Through this selective remembering, Jimbob sought to tell a coherent narrative via his body by ensuring that all of his tattoos relate to Eastern philosophy. He has thus created a sense of temporal stability which was not always experienced in his unsettled life.



Figure 5. Jimbob's Eastern philosophy tattoo theme.

Discussion

Whilst there is a notable literature stream within consumer research exploring the mnemonic value of consumers' possessions (e.g. Belk 1990; Epp and Price 2010; Marcoux 2017), the embodied dimensions of memory work are undertheorised. Considering the entanglements between memory and temporal experiences (Ricoeur 2004), the links between bodies and time are also underexplored. Responding to calls for a more embodied appreciation of temporality (Toyoki et al. 2013), we explored the relations between bodies, time, and memory within the context of tattoo consumption. Our findings concerning embodied processes of remembering and forgetting temporal experiences were enriched by Ricoeur's theories surrounding time, narrative, and memory.

We first outlined the temporal context of our study, and observed how tattoo consumption has a slower perceived tempo than previously witnessed, contrasting with "accelerating" Western cultures. Participants discussed often combatting the fragility of memory by tattooing select and reinterpreted accounts of past life phases, events, and relationships on their skin. Uncertain futures and the permanence of tattooing were important aspects in memory negotiations. Participants often took long breaks from tattooing, and spent considerable time planning tattoos, to avoid future feelings of regret. Furthermore, they sometimes disengaged with tattoo acquisition to omit memories from their bodies in anticipation of future difficulties of remembering. Finally, we further unpacked the selectivity of memory work by exploring how participants used tattoos to construct temporal order and continuity on their bodies despite life's temporal flux.

By focusing upon embodied memory work, we contribute fresh empirical insights into the relations between bodies and time. Whilst there is research into marking life events through bodily modifications (e.g. Oksanen and Turtiainen 2005; Pitts 1998; Velliquette, Murray, and Evers 2006), and the consumption of anti-ageing surgeries/procedures following life turning points (e.g.

Kinnunen 2010; Schouten 1991), time is typically *implicit* in this work. Moreover, despite sociological research into bodily injuries as involuntary mementos of time (Seymour 2002; Sparkes and Smith 2003), studies concerning time in marketing do not usually focus upon the body (e.g. Baker and Cameron 1996; Robinson 2015; Russell and Levy 2012). Woermann and Rokka (2015) and Figueiredo and Uncles (2015) notably discuss the role of habitual bodily routines in negotiating temporality; however, embodied temporality is not their main concern. By exploring the intricacies involved in negotiating past memories through and upon the temporal body, alongside contextualising such practices in light of Western understandings of time, we offer more nuanced and culturally informed understandings of body-time entanglements.

Furthermore, given participants' inscribing of past memories into their skin, and the creation of temporal linearity on their bodies via durable tattoos, our paper demonstrates that the past and the sense of continuity, and even stability, this may bring, are important for consumers. This contrasts with observations of a "temporal flattening" in contemporary Western cultures (Agger 2011; Rosa 2003), and people's desires for transient relations with their possessions in liquid times (Bardhi, Eckhardt, and Arnould 2012; Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017; Figueiredo and Uncles 2015). Indeed, given that consumer culture is perceived as increasingly accelerated and uncertain (Bauman 2000; Rosa 2003), as well as the future appearing fractured (Robinson 2015), people might be seeking respite from such temporal flux through an anchorage to the past via the memories captured within mnemonic objects (Belk 1990), or in this case, the mnemonic body.

Finally, much consumer research focuses on symbolic consumer behaviour, and hence interpreting the narratives expressed by consumers verbally during interviews and through possessions (e.g. Ahuvia 2005; Marion and Nairn 2011). Several consumer researchers have explored the narrative quality of tattooed bodies (e.g. Patterson and Schroeder 2010; Shelton and Peters 2006; Velliquette, Murray, and Evers 2006). Although much tattooing research centres on tattoo acquisition, and thus events consumers desire to remember, Shelton and Peters (2006) investigated tattoo (and hence memory) removals. By considering tattoo consumption as a temporal process, spanning dreaming about tattoos to their possible covering or removal, we also studied participants' omission of temporal experiences from their bodies *altogether*. This builds on Marcoux's (2017) exploration of the role of souvenirs in forgetting difficult events. Our work suggests that the importance of forgetting in influencing consumption decisions may be as evident in the things people do not consume, as it is those things that they do. This signals a need to pay greater attention to the "absences" of consumption.

Conclusions

To conclude, people have historically looked to the cultural realm to preserve memories of themselves and loved ones, for example, through art, monuments, and winning awards (Bauman 1992; Cave 2012). Moreover, the literature regarding material objects and memory has demonstrated that consumers' possessions can hold past memories (Belk 1990; Epp and Price 2010). Yet, as Belk (1988) cautions, these can be lost, stolen, and/or damaged. Indeed, for prisoners whose possessions are taken away, tattoos often become important embodied mementos of their past (Phillips 2001). Human beings have modified their bodies for thousands of years spanning all cultures (Velliquette, Murray, and Evers 2006). Many body-focused industries today, however, are expanding in Western cultures, including tattooing (Patterson 2017), and extending beyond to practices such as piercings, skincare, and healthy foods. Our paper indicates, therefore, how in the backdrop of an accelerating, uncertain, and liquid consumer culture (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017; Bauman 2000), persons might be increasingly turning to their material bodies for comfort, stability, and continuity, despite our bodies ultimately letting us down in the end.

Subsequently, this paper has enhanced understandings of the relations between bodies and time, and in particular, the intricacies involved in remembering and forgetting past memories through the (tattooed) body. This more developed understanding of embodied temporality is relevant to

generating insights into how other bodily modifications link to temporality. Examples might include anti-ageing technologies, scarification, or cyclical body maintenance procedures like hair dyeing. Furthermore, whilst acknowledging the contemporary emphasis of consumer research on fluidity, liquidity, and temporal acceleration, we revealed a continued reliance on the past, accompanied by continuity and stability. Recent consumer trends, such as the Slow Food Movement and the popular Danish practice of “hygge,” provide alternative contexts to develop further insights into such seeking of stability and deceleration. Finally, we also point towards the relevance of “forgetting” and the potential for “absences” in consumption. This focus is relevant in efforts to understand how consumers document select aspects of their lives via social media, whereby the digital context could be fruitful for further unpacking the centrality of forgetting to memory work and consumption absences.

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